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ABSTRACT

By assigning negative value to egocentric language, Jean Piaget equates depersonalized thought and logic with maturity, and gives disproportionate favor to socialized language. By focusing on the deterministic ends to be gained through the acquisition of socialized language, Piaget misses the value of egocentric language. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, James Britton and others argue not only that egocentric language can exist legitimately in the adult and have value for knowledge, but also that highly effective writing is produced when a writer can freely range across the full spectrum of mental activity--from the source of egocentric language, to Piaget's depersonalized thought. So if traces of egocentric language can be found in a student's writing, this should be viewed as a way to build knowledge rather than an indication of immaturity. After all, the mature writer knows the doubt and confusion of one "I" saying to the other, "maybe you have it wrong." It is the uncertainty of egocentric language which insures that thinkers will always have important work to do when speaking and writing. (PRA)

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Situating "Egocentric Language" In The Teaching Of Composition: Piaget, Britton, & Merleau-Ponty

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To begin with here's an epigraph from Frank Conroy's essay, "Think About It" which can be found in The Best American Essays 1989.

> Indeed, in our intellectual lives, our creative lives, it is perhaps those problems that will never resolve that rightly claim the lion's share of our energies. The physical body exists in a constant state of tension as it maintains homeostasis, and so too does the active mind embrace the tension of never being certain, never being absolutely sure, never being done, as it engages the world. That is our special fate, our inexpressibly valuable condition [43].

This morning I want to talk about the tension of never being certain. I want to talk about the work of Jean Piaget, James Britton, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and what I have come to know as "egocentric language," and I want to talk about what might be suggested by connections which can be drawn between that which we experience and identify as egocentric language and the uncertainty which Conroy celebrates in his essay.

Given traces which come along with it, the word egocentric has unmistakeable connotations, and readers of Jean Piaget's The Language And Thought Of The Child will find that the negatives are not muted. In his work describing stages of language development in children, Piaget presents readers with a linear imperative. For Piaget it is natural, necessary, and good for children to progress beyond the confines of egocentric speech to enter the world of socialized speech.

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Underscoring his stance with regard to egocentric language as he draws his book to a close, Piaget writes

> (E)gocentrism certainly hinders . . . effort(s) towards the adaptation and depersonalization of thought . . . . . (T)he more the ego is made the center of interests, the less will the mind be able to depersonalize its thought . . . . Ego-centrism is . . . . obedient to the self's good pleasure and not to the dictates of impersonal logic. It is also an indirect obstacle, because only the habits of discussion and social life will lead to the logical point of view, and ego-centrism is precisely what renders these habits impossible (239-240).

Assigning negative value to egocentric language, Piaget equates depersonalized thought and logic with maturity, and doing so Piaget gives disproportionate favor to socialized language. To be fair it is worth the moment to point out that Piaget does connect egocentrism to the self's good pleasure. Yet with his gaze fixed on deterministic ends to be gained through the acquisition of socialized language, Piaget does not hint at what value egocentrism and the self's good pleasure might have.

I would not have read Piaget, and I would not have gone back to read James Britton's work this past year had I not come across Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language. Under the heading "Examination of Piaget's Views" Merleau-Ponty makes this observation.

> Everything that Piaget says is exact, but must we insist on the same aspects . . . as he does? Do we not find the same egocentric, autistic, syncretic thinking in the adult as soon as his thinking must go beyond the domain of the acquired in order to

> express new notions? The notion of egocentric language can be completely modified if one admits that it exists legitmately in the adult and that it can have value for knowledge [60].

"Of course, egocentric language is a familiar aspect of mature language," I heard myself saying in response to Merleau-Ponty. "If it is not, then my students and myself are immature!" I knew Piaget's work only through Britton, and I wondered, "Then what exactly is Britton's stance toward egocentrism?" Part of me said "Yes, egocentric language is immature." What I identify as egocentric language in student writing is that which underscores gaps between students and their own ideas and their ideas and me. The same kinds of gaps turn up in my own writing. Rhetorically the gaps defy logical resolutions, and I value resolutions which are gained by systematic exposition or logic or what might be called mature thinking. However, the part of me which responded first to Merleau-Ponty also said, "And what would we be and have without ego? What would we have without differences between selves?"

Without the gaps dramatized by different selves we would have nothing to think about. Given Piaget's world of mature adult language, everything would be granted a priori. We would have no reason to teach composition as process, or transaction, or any way except as transcription. We would need only to present students with the wonderful models for copy. Splendidly formal, the world would be as neat as a pin.

Here's what Merleau-Ponty says about Piaget's views of language in general.

> (Piaget's) conception of adult language, an ideal which the child must wait for, appears to be a narrow one. Piaget attributes only a communicative function to language . . . . (He) eliminates from adult language all that is self-expression and appeal to other people . . . . The passage to objective language can be considered equally well as an impoverishment . . . . Passing from childhood to adult will be not only a question of passing from ignorance to knowledge, but also, a passing to a purified language, more definite, but less rich [56-57].

Merleau-Ponty's critique strengthened my conviction, which is founded in Britton, that egocentric language must be respected as a most vital feature of any language user's being with language. In Language And Learning Britton's presentation of Piaget's work represents just one of two essential and entwined ways of thinking about language. Where Piaget's conception of language development sticks to the deterministic line, where the ideal is to censure egocentric language, Britton's conception of language development has always included both movements away from ego-centred language (Piaget's linear track) and vital returns to the centre of origins. This return to the ego-centre figures as a major concern of Britton's work and one of Britton's most important contributions to the field of composition.

In light of "Re-Presenting James Britton: A Symposium," the feature which appeared in the May, 1990 edition of College Composition and Communication I'm taking up a tested position. In her essay "James Britton: An Impressionistic Sketch," Mary Kay Tirrell calls attention

to the importance of Britton's hypothesis "that expressive writing should be regarded as a matrix from which the other two categories develop" [167]. The other two categores are the transactional and the poetic of course. And Tirrell goes on to say this: "As a careful reader of Piaget, Jimmy [Britton] views egocentrism, not as something which must be rooted out, but as a part of the normal growth pattern" [168]. In "Collaborating with Jimmy Britton" Gordon Pradl applauds Britton's supportive conversations . . . . which have provided students and colleagues with extensions and elaborations for their own emerging meanings and goes on to note that for Britton, "Making knowledge personal requires language that is infused with one's own attitudes, connections, revelations. Thus," Pradl writes, "expressive is not a melody of idiosyncrasy, but a harmony of connection" [173]. Finally, in response, Britton himself amplifies the basic motif that "immature expressive [discourse is] a matrix from which later forms [of discourse] will be evolved" [183].

Britton's expressive discourse springs from the ego-source. The emerging meanings, connections, and attitudes which Pradl mentions spring from the same source. Experiencing the evolution that Britton refers to, individuals are able to participate in society with more and more objectivity--and not without a personal voice, which springs from the ego-source. And not without senses of irony: For mature language users know that the limits of language may be no farther removed than the next thought. The point to bear in mind is that there is nothing immature about confusion. While egocentric language

may mark a self's confusion about the world and/or with language, the same language represents the self's opposition to "nothing"--the gap--or to an "everything" so encompassing as to cast one's self in doubt. Explaining Paul Guillaume's reverse interpretation of the problem of ego, Merleau-Ponty determines what this "everything" might involve.

> The classical problem [of ego] was a question of passing from consciousness of self to consciousness of others. For Guillaume, it is a question of constructing a representative self from others. In effect, it is other people who occupy the principal position for the child. The child considers himself only as "another other" [37].

Understanding the ego problem as one which we can never completely escape, we recognize how important it is for our students to resist total surrender to languages other than their own, languages like academic discourse for instance, discourse which as Peter Elbow says in the most recent College English can be used by students and professors alike to mask a lack of genuine understanding [137].

Reading Merleau-Ponty has permitted me to be a better reader of Britton. Merleau-Ponty amplifies the important point that egocentric language exists in the adult and that it can have value for knowledge. In his essay "Shaping at the Point of Utterance" in Prospect And Retrospect Britton stresses the same thing. Reflecting upon relationships between writing and discovery, offering a variation on a theme by Barrett Mandel, Britton argues that ". . . highly effective writing may be produced. . . . [when a writer can freely range] across

the full spectrum of mental activity from the autistic pole to the reality-adjusted pole" [141]. The autistic pole, of course, marks the source of egocentric language while the reality-adjusted pole matches up with Piaget's depersonalized thought, where Merleau-Ponty, and Peter Elbow too, find the danger of impoverishment.

Piaget says that "only the habits of discussion and social life will lead to the logical point of view, and ego-centrism is precisely what renders these habits impossible" [240]. In light of considerations which have preceded this point, taking away the negative prefix makes the statement agreeable. Ego-centrism is precisely what renders these habits of impersonal logic possible, for without questions, without confusion, without gaps which are dramatized by the self's struggles to bridge the difference between self and others, the content and form of what we might call "logic" is inert. Without problems egocentricism faces logic with, logic is impoverished.

There is something else that is possible--that the conception of the ego as an indivisible monad, which without the presence of otners plays no part in the making of difference, is insufficient. Expanding on possibilities set forth by Plato in the Theaetetus and the Sophist Hannah Arendt splits the ego and provides ever more reason to identify egocentric language as the most important source and resource for the making of knowledge. Arendt writes the following.

> Human consciousness suggests that difference and otherness. . . are the very conditions for the existence of man's ego as well. For this ego. . .

> experiences difference in identity precisely when it is not related to the things that appear but only to itself. Without this original split, which Plato later used in his definition of thinking as soundless dialogue. . . between me and myself, the two-in-one, which Socrates presupposes in his statement about harmony with myself, would not be possible. Consciousness is not the same as thinking; but without it thinking would be impossible. What thinking actualizes in its process is the difference given in consciousness [442].

This "original split" which Arendt speaks of makes it possible to locate more surely in egocentric language sources which provide openings for the impersonal logic valued by Piaget. We already know how valuable disagreement is for knowledge. With Arendt's model we understand how Vygotsky's and Britton's inner speech can involve sharp disagreement. Disagreements with oneself may not inhibit, rather, they can encourage participation in the world of language with others who can aid in seeking settlements for ego-rifts. So when we encounter traces of egocentric language in speech or in writing we may view those traces as the most powerful sources for knowledge-making in our classes and in our students' writing.

"[T]he active mind," Frank Conroy says, "embrace[s] the tension of never being certain, never being absolutely sure, never being done." Conroy writes from experience. The mature writer knows the doubt and confusion of one "I" saying to another "I," "Maybe you don't have that 'right' after all. But try it this way. Try it like this. . . ." Implicit in Britton, Merleau-Ponty, and Conroy's work are Arendt's two <u>I's,</u> carrying on between themselves. They are what we think about; they dramatize differences which are expressed initially as egocentric

language--language to be valued. It is the uncertainty which egocentric language foregrounds for all of us within and without social/transactional contexts which insures that much is not given in our classes and insures that thinkers will always have important work to do speaking and writing.

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